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Labour and agrarian violence in the Irish midlands, 1850-1870

Niall Whelehan

Generally on the wane in the rest of Ireland, agrarian violence increased in the midlands in the decades after the Great Famine. During the 1850s and 1860s the regular occurrence of violent intimidation and over twenty murders led police and parliament to declare the widespread existence of Ribbonism, the agrarian secret society whose members they perceived to be expertly able to avoid arrest. Ribbonmen had been active in the midlands in the 1820s and 1840s, but in the post-Famine decades episodes of agrarian violence, particularly a series of six murders in the late-1860s, engendered something of a moral panic in Ireland about a breakdown in law and order. Among the victims were James Fetherston-Haugh, a prominent landlord, and Thomas Anketell, the Mullingar railway stationmaster. Both men held relatively high profiles and their murders focused national anxieties. In 1870 a Select Committee was established to investigate agrarian crime in Westmeath, Meath and King's County (now Offaly) and, concerned by their findings, the authorities suspended habeas corpus in order to quell the 'anarchy.'¹

Agrarian violence was traditionally connected to rents and evictions, but Anketell's murder stands apart in that it did not concern land. Similarly, when Francis Dowling took up a clerk's position at a flour mill in Ballinagore, Westmeath, in 1868 he received threatening letters and eventually paid the highest price for his employment when two nocturnal assassins shot him dead. When Dowling was replaced, threatening letters were again sent, and this time the new clerk left the post at once.² The chief suspect was William Maloney. He had been dismissed from the post prior to Dowling's arrival and was a cousin of the known Ribbon leader 'Captain' James Duffy. Maloney fled to the United States in 1871 when habeas corpus was suspended. Another victim, Rowland Tarleton, was a large farmer, but he was killed because he had dismissed a herdsman. According to *The Westmeath Guardian*, many so-called Ribbon crimes in the 1850s and 1860s were 'totally unconnected with the ownership or occupation of land', and were of 'a trades-union character.'³ When responding to the 1870 Select Committee, resident magistrates were in agreement about Ribbonism's influence over labour matters, identifying it 'in the ordinary relations between master and servant' and the use of Ribbon tactics in 'all matters of grievance', excepting trade.⁴

This article explores wage labour as a site of violent contention in rural Ireland in the decades after the Famine. Joe Lee's influential 1973 article 'The Ribbonmen' argued that most agrarian violence resulted from disputes between labourers and farmers, rather than between farmers and landlords as had traditionally been thought, and subsequent studies have interpreted and contested various aspects of this argument.⁵ The focus on labourers, farmers and landlords, however, has obscured the roles of other groups in Ribbonism and agrarian violence. Turning our attention to different occupations can add nuance and improve our understandings of intra-communal violence. In 1836 Cornewall Lewis observed how Whiteboyism functioned as a 'vast trades union' to regulate landlord-tenant relations, yet beyond land matters the tactics of agrarian secret societies were also employed in pre-Famine Ireland by wage labourers, such as quarrymen in Dalkey or workers on the Royal canal.⁶ In the post-Famine period, herdsman, clerks and railway workers employed old tactics for new jobs. The familiar methods of the Ribbonmen, nocturnal intimidation by armed parties, firing at the person,

destruction of property, and threatening notices and letters, were employed in attempts to control hiring and firing and regulate labour conditions.

The use of intimidation and physical violence in labour matters, as with land disputes, raises questions concerning the degrees to which group solidarity or personal gain moved the perpetrators to action. A. C. Murray has argued that the agrarian violence that flared up in the midlands in the late-1860s was a form of 'rural gangsterism', and the ruthless Ribbon organisation supposedly behind it was largely the invention of an incompetent constabulary.⁷ Historian William Vaughan agreed, adding that due to the absence of corporate traditions, leadership and modern organisational structures, there was nothing that 'remotely resembled trade unions' among the rural working class during this period.⁸ These interpretations raise valid points, but one wonders if the emphasis on apolitical gangsterism is overstated. Dismissing labour solidarities due to the lack of corporate structures carries the whiff of modernization theory, regarding politicisation as failed in the absence of the more formal organisations of modernity. By contrast, Fintan Lane has argued that while rural labourers may not have engaged with formal politics, they did demonstrate political agency and collectivism in 'localised groups and informal social movements.'⁹ To explore these questions this article focuses on herdsmen and railway workers and their use of Ribbon tactics. E. P. Thompson argued that collective violence was part of an 'expressive symbolic vocabulary' that functioned as a mechanism of negotiation for actors outside of formal legal and political structures.¹⁰ There are evident differences between Thompson's raucous peasant crowds in Britain and the silent Ribbon gunmen who terrorized perceived transgressors of customary laws, but Ribbon tactics were nonetheless employed as a means of bargaining with local power holders by actors and communities without access to formal political space.

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Brutal acts of intimidation and physical violence in order to control jobs in the midlands were common in the years after the Famine. In 1852 John Lyons, an outsider in the district where he obtained employment, was beaten to death.¹¹ In 1865, a farmer in Rathconrath, Westmeath, received threatening letters telling him not to employ strangers. The letters were ignored and soon his servant, a native of Kildare, was badly beaten and ordered to return home.¹² The same year, two men made a night visit to Michael Daly's house in Ballinagore and beat him for putting another man out of a job with a local miller. Daly refused to speak to the police about the matter and when they questioned his mother, she said she 'would prefer being hanged to giving any information.'¹³

Looking at the returns of the Westmeath Assize courts from the 1869 summer session to the 1871 spring session – the period of moral panic that provoked the 1871 Westmeath Act – disputes over land and rents were the most common source of rural crime, at 55 per cent of a total of 318 offences recorded during the period. At the same time, 18 per cent of all offences recorded were related to labour.¹⁴ Prior to the 1869 harvest, threatening notices were posted near Tyrrellspass by local labourers to deter farmers 'from using or letting for hire mowing machines.' In other areas the property of farmers who used reaping machines was damaged and hay mowed with machines was burned. In Meath, arson was used to destroy buildings on a number of farms where corn was mowed with machinery.¹⁵ In August 1870 a 'stranger' working as a servant near Delvin was ordered to leave his job, which he did the next day.¹⁶ In November, a serious assault occurred at Rathduff to prevent an employer from hiring labourers from Dublin to cut timber. Three labourers in Lisclougher were intimidated and instructed to stop working, unless at the increased rate of wages. Some blacksmiths, millers and tailors from outside the locality were intimidated and ordered to leave. A miller's servant had gunshots fired over his head and then into his thigh before being beaten.¹⁷ Threatening letters were sent to landlords and large farmers instructing them to hire named men who were unemployed, or face the consequences. Ribbon methods were not only confined to manual labour. The Inspector

of National Schools also received a threatening letter in October 1870 after he dismissed schoolteachers in Mullingar.¹⁸

Around 5 per cent of all offences recorded for this period involved herdsmen. Mullingar RM George Talbot asserted that Ribbonism was common among 'herds and caretakers' and, when asked by the Select Committee if Ribbonism extended beyond landlord-tenant relations, Crown solicitor John Julian replied it did, 'to cases of the employment of herds and stewards.'¹⁹ Herdsmen looked after livestock, saved crops and maintained fences, sheds and drainage on estates and middling to large grazing farms. From the early nineteenth century some grazing was practiced in Westmeath, Meath and King's County, but herdsmen were relatively few in number until after the Famine. Respondents to the 1836 Poor Inquiry observed how tillage remained extensive in many parts of the midlands and hence there was little work for herds.²⁰ In the same year, a traveller passing through the midlands observed how the countryside was 'almost all in cultivation.'²¹ As Irish agriculture became more commercialised over the course of the nineteenth century, the expansion of livestock markets and grazing farms swallowed up tillage farms and increased the demand for herdsmen, or shepherds as they were also known.

Herdsmen in the midlands were paid principally in cash wages. In Connacht, John Cunningham's study has revealed how they were paid in collops: the right to put a set number of cattle and sheep to pasture on their employers' land. They were also provided with a small dwelling house.²² These conditions prevailed in the west of Ireland into the late-nineteenth century, but herdsmen in the midlands underwent a sort of proletarianization in the mid-nineteenth century when remuneration came increasingly in the form of cash wages. In the 1830s, herdsmen in Westmeath, Meath and Offaly were also remunerated in collops, but 'sometimes they agree for the entire wages in money, £10 being the usual allowance for the year.'²³ By the 1860s, the dominant form of remuneration for herdsmen in Westmeath was cash wages, the amount depending on the acreage of the farm, though they continued to be provided with a dwelling. The 1836 Poor Inquiry observed that herds in Westmeath were 'a description of labourers the best off of all', and it seems that this perception remained in the post-Famine decades.²⁴ Herdsmen were relatively well paid, depending on the acreage of the farm, and the post entailed a measure of respectability greater than that of labourer.

The thirty years between the end of the Famine and the Land War witnessed a steady increase in grazing in the midlands. The total number of cattle in Westmeath, Meath and King's county increased from 203,268 to 341,656.²⁵ In the southern part of Westmeath, the cattle population increased by 36 per cent, the numbers of sheep trebled and tillage acreage fell by 61 per cent.²⁶ With the expansion of livestock, the numbers of herdsman increased and the post provided an alternative to farming or emigration. By the end of the 1860s, 70 herdsmen (shepherds and drovers) worked in Westmeath, while there were 3,708 agricultural labourers, 4,342 farm servants and 5,904 farmers. In King's County 122 herdsmen were present among 6,144 labourers, 4366 servants and 5936 farmers. In Meath 198 herdsmen were employed among 4,196 labourers, 4878 servants and 6047 farmers, the higher quantity reflecting the county's higher population but also the absence of boglands that were common in Westmeath and King's County. Overall, there was 1 herdsman for every 35 servants, every 36 labourers and every 46 farmers in the three counties.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of these numbers is how few herdsmen there were. Interestingly, by 1881 their numbers had increased six-fold in Westmeath to 435, four-fold in Meath to 837 and up to 200 in King's County. This spike in 1881 indicates that a bureaucratic change must have occurred in the census regarding how the occupation was enumerated. Grazing and livestock numbers did not accelerate wildly in the 1870s in a manner that would account for the sharp increase in herdsmen; instead, it is more likely that herdsmen were under-calculated in 1870.²⁷ At the same time, herdsmen were still a comparatively small group and the frequency with which they were the targets of violence was disproportionate to their number.

In 1871, the MP W.H. Gregory declared in the House of Commons that if ‘a man employed a herd or a shepherd and dismissed him for neglect; the secret edict went forth, and the shepherd’s successor was instantly shot.’²⁸ Looking at the outrage returns for the midlands, violence or the threat of violence was frequently employed to ‘force a herdsman to leave his place’, to force employers to rehire dismissed herdsman, or to deter employers from hiring herdsman from outside the locality.²⁹ Threats were far more common than the use of force, typically threatening notices posted in fields, or in one instance in Rahugh a coffin was drawn in gravel outside a widow’s home when she attempted to dismiss a herdsman.³⁰ Another herdsman was fired at because he ‘had manifested strictness towards the labourers under his charge.’³¹ Threats were used to deter labourers and herdsman from working on disputed farms, as in nearby Cloneyhaigue, where notices posted on the local church warned people not to work on the land of the agent Hornidge. The dispute over this farm produced much violence in the 1860s and resulted in the stationing of extra police in the townland.³²

Herdsman were frequently the targets of agrarian violence, but they themselves were rarely arrested. When the 1871 Westmeath Act came into force the police drew up a list of fifty-four suspected Ribbonmen to be arrested. Farmers, labourers and farmers’ sons dominated the list that included just one herdsman, and he was in Meath. It seems that herdsman themselves rarely got physically involved, instead violence was undertaken on their behalf by brothers, fathers, uncles or neighbours. This was the case in 1863, when a carpenter was beaten to death with a loaded whip in Carrick, in the Kilbeggan district, after he had given information to his employer that resulted in the dismissal of a herdsman.³³ In 1869 a farmer and member of the King’s County Militia, Rowland Tarleton, was shot dead in the afternoon in a field on the outskirts of Athlone. Four men, most of whom were from the local Burns family, were arrested but released due to a lack of evidence. Six months previously Tarleton had dismissed one of the Burns as a herd and replaced him with Michael Dowd, Burn’s own nephew. Burns continued to occupy the herdsman’s house, along with his nephew, but Tarleton also became dissatisfied with Dowd and dismissed him too. In trying to recover possession of the house from the two men, Tarleton was killed.³⁴ Nobody was charged with the murder.

The disproportionate violence associated with the post of herdsman in the decades after the Great Famine suggests that, as a comparatively well-paid and respectable job, it was coveted by families as a means of improving the socio-economic status of sons and nephews, or providing them with an alternative to emigration given the dwindling opportunities in an increasingly grazing-orientated rural landscape. One study of rural labour has observed how, at the turn of the century, herdsman were occasionally disdained by labourers and tenant farmers and targeted as representatives of ‘market-orientated agricultural usage.’³⁵ In Westmeath and the neighbouring parts of Meath and Offaly, however, herds were not targeted for complicity in clearances and commercial grazing. Intimidation and violence aimed to determine who got the job and stayed in it.

Most agrarian violence in the midlands occurred in Westmeath. Emigration from the county increased substantially in the years 1863-1867, when a swift outflow was prompted by the agricultural depression of 1863. In 1841, the population of the county was 141,390, by 1861 it had dropped to 90,856 and by 1871 to 78,416. *The Westmeath Guardian* noted the ‘astonishing’ flow of emigration during the 1860s, reaching its highest levels since the Great Famine.³⁶ These years of high emigration were years of low agrarian violence, with Ribbonism erupting again when emigration tailed off in 1868. Tellingly, the most disturbed districts – Kilbeggan and Mullingar – were the ones that experienced the highest levels of emigration between 1863 and 1867. Further research is required, but it appears that without emigration the midlands would have experienced unrest of a greater intensity. The emigration of rural labourers had the effect of reducing conflict with farmers, while the outflow of indebted tenants facilitated clearances for grazing, while they also left farms

behind them that gave options to the farmers' sons who remained at home that they might not otherwise have had. Equally, emigration complicated inheritance patterns and destabilized rural relationships in ways that resulted in tension and disharmony when the contraction occurred in 1868.³⁷ Emigrated relatives with vague claims to inheritance often re-appeared, threatening the occupiers of a newly vacated farm with violence. These disputes could get out of hand if they weren't delicately negotiated.³⁸ Some emigrated Ribbonmen also returned: publican and Ribbon leader James Melia, for example, went to Buenos Aires in 1863 and returned in 1868.

It is tempting to see the violence associated with herdsmen as little more than the result of competition between individuals and families over jobs when emigration contracted, with vague Ribbon threats employed to add a grim seriousness to what were little more than personal disputes. In the 1880s/90s, one study noted how herdsmen in the west of Ireland were largely non-violent and 'established representative bodies – leagues, associations, trade unions – to protect and advance their interests.'³⁹ Comparable organisations were not manifest in the midlands in the 1860s, making it more difficult to identify occupational solidarity. Yet, determining the hiring and firing of herdsmen entailed a larger symbolic battle between employers and locals. If we agree with Thompson and see rural violence as a form of politicised bargaining with its own conventions and limits, the disproportionate levels of violence connected with herdsmen indicated how the post was an important part of bargaining process. Though not new in the 1860s, the occupation became more widespread and locals were understandably keen to see that positions were made available to locals and not outsiders. When labourers deemed a herdsman to have been unfairly dismissed on a farm near Killucan, they fired several warning shots at his replacement when he took up the post. The landlord Fetherston-Haugh dismissed them all but could not find replacements, to the extent that his wage bill was reduced from £40 to £3 per week.⁴⁰ Ensuring that a post remained unfilled for a length of time was a symbolic action that communicated what would be tolerated on the farm.

Herdsmen occupied a sort of middle-ground between labourers and farmers. When giving evidence to the Select Committee William Mooney, the Clerk of the Crown for Westmeath, asserted that landlords had submitted to Ribbonism in that they confidentially employed Ribbonmen to act as mediaries between themselves and their employees and tenants. When asked in what capacity were these men employed, Mooney responded 'as herds very often.' Bishop of Meath Thomas Nulty went so far as to contend that Ribbonmen were employed by the despised landlord Rochfort Boyd to provide protection from violent tenants.⁴¹ In Cloneyhaigue, the land agent Hornidge was repeatedly threatened and fired at because he refused to rent a disputed farm to the local Ribbonman 'Captain' Duffy. In July 1869 Hornidge set the land to a farmer named Payne from the nearby village Tyrrellspass, who promptly received a threatening letter warning him to have nothing 'further to do directly or indirectly on the lands of Cloneyhaigue.' Reade, the Kilbeggan resident magistrate, strongly suspected that Payne's herdsman Martin Kelly wrote the letter, but Hornidge counselled that it would be unwise to dismiss Kelly for Payne's safety and the general quiet: 'these Cloneyhaigue people being, as was once said to me, like a hive of bees.'⁴²

If Payne had complied, Kelly would have written himself out of a job, but he was surely given some guarantees from local Ribbonmen, with whom he was connected. The following November Kelly himself was the victim of Ribbon violence when he was shot in the back whilst travelling home. He survived, despite the fact that his companions refused to help him, leaving him on the road. Reade believed the incident was a Ribbon punishment or warning for Kelly, who was known to be talkative when drunk.⁴³ Interestingly, of the many threatening letters circulating in Cloneyhaigue at this time, several were posted in Clara, a town some thirteen miles away in King's County, highlighting the continued presence of rural Ribbon networks after the Famine. Hornidge's reluctance to remove Kelly from his post indicates the delicate arrangements existing inside rural communities and the limits of what was tolerable to each side. The post of herdsman was of strategic

importance in the larger context of landlord/employer relations with local communities, and for this reason it attracted more than its fair share of violence. In the 1870s, though the numbers of herdsman increased, levels of violence did not rise due to the flight of many Ribbon suspects before the passing of the 1871 Westmeath Act, which remained in force until 1877.

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The episodes of Ribbonism perhaps that most resembled trade unionism occurred on the railway, notably the case of Anketell, the stationmaster at Mullingar, a town of about 5,000 inhabitants. The railway had been operating in Westmeath for over twenty years and by 1871, 182 servants, navvies and labourers were employed on the county railways, along with 26 officers and stationmasters. Of the latter, Anketell was the most well known. 'Regarded with ill-will by a certain confederacy amongst the lower classes', numerous grudges were held against him. Anketell had recently dismissed some porters and servants and denied access to a garden (a privilege expected by railway workers) to a blacksmith who had incorporated the garden into his own. He also took actions to stop employees taking coal.⁴⁴ This did not necessarily entail stealing, as the taking away of waste coal may have been an established practice among workers that was tolerated by employers. Two labourers, father and son, were arrested for his murder, but were eventually released owing to a lack of evidence. Typically for crimes of this nature, the police had difficulties finding witnesses. When one person came forward she was hounded out of Mullingar by a mob 'of women, boys and children who hooted and threatened the unfortunate woman.'⁴⁵

Anketell's murder was not the first episode of violence on the midlands railway. In 1858 four men paid a night visit to a railway lodge near Mullingar and heavily beat a ganger until his wife disturbed the scene. He had dismissed six labourers in the previous months and local papers readily attributed the act to the Ribbonmen.⁴⁶ In November of the same year, *The Evening Mail* observed the 'protean' character of Ribbonism when the Great Southern and Western Railway lowered the wages of labourers constructing the Athlone to Tullamore railway line, owing to shorter winter days. The reduction resulted in a 'furious mob' of hundreds of labourers marching 'from Athlone along the line towards Tullamore, forcibly driving all the labourers from their work, and beating every "ganger" or overseer, who was so unfortunate as to fall into their hands.' They also broke tools and machinery. The paper pointed out how several Ribbonmen 'were observed as leaders of the mob, although not employed in the railway works.'⁴⁷ The constabulary observed the mob's actions, but did not intervene. As a result of the violence, the company suspended almost all work, while large forces of police were stationed at different points along the line.

When questioned by the Select Committee, the chairman of the Midland Great Western Railway Company, Ralph Cusack, described actions in Westmeath such as 'rails taken up, the mail train upset, and a gentleman's leg broken', and several other people injured. In Meath, gunshots were fired at a train after the dismissal of one employee. Stationmasters in Meath and Westmeath were aware of employees taking coal, but did not interfere for fear of retaliation.⁴⁸ When asked if Ribbonism had penetrated the railway system in Ireland, magistrate Talbot was in no doubt: 'it is pretty well known that on one of the principal [rail] lines of Ireland, Ribbonism has a very great effect upon the whole of the people employed.'⁴⁹

The Midland Great Western Railway was one of twenty-three companies working about 2000 miles of railway in Ireland. In 1871 linesmen on the Irish North Western Railway went on strike, and in 1876 goods guards in the midlands did likewise, probably inspired by the formation in Britain of the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants in the 1870s.⁵⁰ Joseph Leckey maintained that 'in the middle decades of the nineteenth century the managers hired and fired staff at will', arguing that conditions did not improve until the 1890s.⁵¹ Yet prior to the arrival of formal railway unions Ribbonism functioned as a surrogate form of collective bargaining. It might be argued that a bargain

implies a two-way negotiation, and employers were not always prepared to parley. Collective punishment was sometimes imposed by the railway companies in the form of a 10 per cent reduction in labourers' pay for twelve months, even if the outrage was little more than the delinquent acts of leaving stones on the track or throwing stones at trains.⁵² At the same time, Ribbon tactics frustrated the Midland Great Western Railway Company and brought small victories for the workers. When one labourer was arrested and imprisoned for three months, Cusack observed that 'from that time to this we have never been able to get anyone to take his place.' On another occasion, the company 'had to take back persons who had been dismissed.' These symbolic actions went beyond personal grievances and individual compensation claims. By comparison with England and other parts of Ireland, the chairman maintained, replacing labourers in Westmeath and Meath was extremely difficult, 'unless the person selected was pleasing to the district.' Cusack attributed the troubles to Ribbonism, prevalent among 'the lower class, mostly the labouring class.'⁵³ Skilled workers and the middle class were exempt, in his view, and the magistrates concurred, asserting that Ribbonism held no influence over traders in the towns, just the unskilled workers and some publicans.

The railway company also ran the canal system in Mullingar which, by contrast, was tranquil. Seeming to contradict himself, the chairman attributed this tranquillity to 'a secret society among the men, and by their having been allowed for years to have all the appointments to themselves. As soon as a man dies, or goes away, the company are told who to put in his place. Those people act as a sort of police, and protect the place.'⁵⁴ The high levels of organisation among the canal workers resulted from the prevalence of 'the Ribbon system' on the Royal canal since 1821 and the use of agrarian tactics to negotiate working conditions.⁵⁵ It seems likely that in a relatively small town the canal and rail workers knew each other, and the former offered a model by which other labourers could regulate their occupations. The higher staff turnover and greater movement on the railway, by comparison with the canal, meant that similar attempts at worker control sometimes brought tensions and confrontation. Nonetheless, the ability to ensure that posts remained vacant without the workers' consent and to retain practices such as taking coal, gave the navvies and labourers a degree of bargaining power that shaded the existing collectivism with class consciousness and trade union aspects.

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Compared with previous decades, a more self-consciously politicised language was used to articulate grievances in threatening letters in the 1860s, something recognised by Vaughan in his study of agrarian crime.⁵⁶ In the midlands, slogans like 'land for the people' crept into threatening letters along with the vocabulary of tyranny, rich versus poor, and tenants' rights. Regularly signed by the folk persona 'Rory of the Hills', letters evoked the collective, promising that 'we' would exact violence or death on recipients, and sometimes their families, if they did not comply with demands. A threatening letter in Castlepollard warned against the enclosure of commonage and elsewhere a notice declared 'lands must be let for the use of the public as formerly and any tyrant landlord who turns out a tenant will meet with his reward.' More letters spoke of the enforcement of 'country rights' and accused landlords of bribing officials 'to help you rob and murder the poor.' A notice posted in Delvin was signed by 'enemies to oppression.'⁵⁷

In the Tory *Westmeath Guardian*, editorials observed an increasing politicisation among the rural working class and warned of the dangers of promoting 'the stale humbug of tenant rights', which only worsened the situation and made an instinctually violent people even more unruly.⁵⁸ The newspaper's disdain was likely stoked by the moderate Tenant Right League (1850) and Tenant Rights Society (1852). When the Westmeath Tenant Right Committee was established in 1863 it drew the same response, with the newspaper advising that the 'lower classes' should focus more on their responsibilities to law and order and free-trade, rather than false 'notions of rights.'⁵⁹ Criticism

of 'rights' intensified in the newspaper in 1858, the year of the Irish Republican Brotherhood's establishment. By 1863, the editor openly lamented that the 'peasantry are so perverted by Ribbonism and Fenianism [...] they have imbibed such preposterous notions of their rights, that kindness is in great measure lost upon them.'⁶⁰

From its beginnings, the IRB principally drew artisans and skilled workers into its ranks and this urban profile has encouraged the view that Fenianism was discrete from rural interests. Evidence to the Select Committee was mixed. Talbot asserted that Ribbonism provided the Fenians with 'a ready field to work upon', but other witnesses maintained that 'the two could not go together', and that Ribbonism 'was totally different from Fenianism.'⁶¹ Fenian memoirs sometimes make similar distinctions, but come with their own caveats: Ribbonism would always be separate and subordinate for the refined John O'Leary.⁶² Some historians have viewed them as 'ideologically indifferent', or in competition for talented organisers.⁶³ Others differ, and Fintan Lane has argued that clear empathies existed between rural labourers and republican artisans.⁶⁴ Tom Garvin and James Donnelly have distinguished Ribbonism from other agrarian societies, drawing attention to its heightened nationalist sentiments and the presence of Ribbon lodges in Irish cities and towns, as well as in rural areas.⁶⁵ A study of post-Famine Monaghan found that although some Ribbonmen were hostile toward the IRB's nondenominational politics, there was considerable overlap between the two secret societies.⁶⁶ This overlap was also evident in the midlands, probably to a greater extent as religious loyalties were not as divisive. All witnesses to the Select Committee observed how religion was rarely, if ever, a factor in agrarian violence there. Indeed, being both a Fenian and a Ribbonman hardly presented conflicting identities for members and it is difficult to envisage how involvement in rural disputes was an obstacle to being a Fenian, both in terms of organisations but also ideas.

Fenian rhetoric in the 1860s had plenty to offer disgruntled workers in rural areas. The IRB did not directly address an Irish working class, but the 1867 *Proclamation of an Irish Republic* spoke of 'oppression of labour' and declared, 'the soil of Ireland ... belongs to us, the Irish people.'⁶⁷ The presence of slogans such as 'land for the people' in threatening letters suggests that Fenian ideas made some impression. Marta Ramon has persuasively emphasised how 'peasant proprietorship, social egalitarianism, working-class self-reliance' were crucial aspects of IRB thinking in the 1860s.⁶⁸ Their newspaper *The Irish People* (1863-65) held a limited readership, but in Athlone, Doyle's newsagents received twenty subscriptions and McCormack's in Mullingar received twelve.⁶⁹ Along with *The Irish People* ideas circulated through IRB organisers in the midlands. From a list of Fenians arrested during the period 1866-68, Vincent Comerford found that Westmeath held the sixth highest number of arrests in the thirty-two counties.⁷⁰ This high number may be partially explained by the authorities inaccurately counting Ribbonmen for Fenians, but the RIC's confusion also indicates how the two secret societies did occasionally overlap and the number of arrests gives some measure of IRB activity in the county.⁷¹ Given that Westmeath's population was significantly lower than all the counties above it on the list, it seems fair to say that the impact of these Fenians was not trivial. They may have been concentrated in urban areas, but this did not entail the exclusion of rural members or the alienation of Ribbonmen. Many rural labourers in the midlands lived in the towns due to the seasonal nature of work, and farmers had to 'go into the towns and bring them out' when needed.⁷²

Incidents of agrarian activity bore Fenian aspects. In 1863 a large gang of men 'attacked and waylaid' six labourers at Rathowen, Westmeath during the night because they were strangers. The same night a constable came across about fifty men marching in military order in the same neighbourhood. This was undoubtedly the same group and military-style marching was a well-known Fenian activity.⁷³ In 1869 a labourer and likely Fenian named Daniel Ennis organised a meeting in the Hill of Down in Meath, in order to demand increased wages and better conditions for rural

labourers.⁷⁴ Magistrate Talbot also indicated nationalist motives behind Anketell's death, as he had 'deprived the Fenians and the Ribbonmen of facilities for landing their arms.'⁷⁵ *The Westmeath Guardian* identified a new defiance and absence of respect for 'superiors' among labourers, calling to mind the social attitude associated with IRB members.⁷⁶ As we have already seen, the intensification of emigration partly explains the low levels of agrarian crime in the years 1863-67, but the Fenian activity of these years was also a likely factor. Levels of agrarian violence rose in 1868, suggesting that once the IRB lost momentum after the abortive 1867 rising there was a return to so-called Ribbon activities by members who avoided arrest.

Ribbonmen, of course, did not depend on Fenians to politicise their grievances. Long retaining a transnational aspect through their presence in centres of the Irish diaspora, Ribbon lodges were identified by police in Newcastle, Liverpool, Glasgow and Manchester. Magistrates in Westmeath maintained that 'the principal parties do not reside in Ireland', but in these headquarters in England and Scotland.⁷⁷ Recent studies have highlighted the influence of Chartist and English radical thinking on Irish nationalism and Fenianism, facilitated in part by the presence of Fenian circles in Britain.⁷⁸ It is unlikely that the Ribbon Lodges in Britain were impervious to similar influences, and agrarian violence should not be viewed simply as a parochial matter. The presence of Ribbon networks in Britain, established before the Famine, facilitated the circulation of wider social and political outlooks into rural communities that might otherwise have remained isolated. There are indications that Fenian rhetoric introduced a more radical vocabulary into rural areas, which the perpetrators of agrarian violence borrowed to express their grievances. Yet it would also be an exaggeration to state that these attitudes were entirely new; rather, the IRB connected with existing outlooks in the countryside.

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Aspects of agrarian violence in the post-Famine midlands can be interpreted in terms of wage labour and knowing more about violence that was unconnected to either rents or evictions, it is argued here, improves our understanding of rural solidarities and antipathies. Acts of violence resist definitive categorization and elements of both greed and grievance were visible. At times, Ribbon actions resembled a form of mafia or gangsterism to control good jobs, the murder of the aging clerk Francis Dowling at Ballinagore flour mill, for example, ostensibly benefitted just one person. Yet, the gangster interpretation is limited by the low levels of larceny recorded in the midlands during periods of intense violence. Joe Lee observed this during the pre-Famine period when he pointed out that, despite the frequency of armed moonlight visits, the Ribbonmen rarely robbed their victims.⁷⁹ Threatening letters were a relatively effective method of intimidation and very difficult for the police to detect, and though they were flying around Westmeath like Christmas cards in the 1860s, only one reported letter was an attempt at extortion. When questioned about instances of larceny in the county, magistrates responded, 'they are very rare; they are quite the exception.'⁸⁰

Ribbonism was fading in the 1860s, becoming more of a label than a potent organising force, but whether or not the perpetrators were sworn Ribbonmen is beside the point; there will always be doubt about the workings of secret societies. The actions of the railway workers, herdsmen and labourers were effective because they consciously engaged with communal perceptions of Ribbonism as the upholder of unwritten law in order to legitimise their actions to their communities. Increases in the number of occupations that paid a weekly wage in post-Famine Ireland opened up new sites of contention in rural communities and saw the extension of Ribbon repertoires of action to circumstances not so remote from trade unionism and class solidarity. Intracommunal violence, such as attacks on blackleg herdsmen or navvies, served as symbolic means to demark collective understandings of entitlement and formed part of larger power struggles between employers and the rural working classes.

Notes

- 1 The 1871 Westmeath Act proclaimed Westmeath, and parts of Meath and Kings' County, and substantially reduced the levels of violence in under one year. Despite the swift results, it remained in force until June 1877. *Report from the Select Committee on Westmeath, &c. (Unlawful Combinations); together with the proceedings of the committee, minutes of evidence, and appendix*, HC, Parliamentary Papers 1871 vol. xiii; *The Nation*, 18 May 1875.
- 2 Notebook of Resident Magistrate Reade, 17 Oct 1870, National Archives of Ireland (NAI from here on), Official Papers II, 1871/85; *Select Committee*, pp. 173, 188.
- 3 *Westmeath Guardian*, 27 January 1870.
- 4 *Select Committee*, pp. 42, 48.
- 5 J. J. Lee, 'The Ribbonmen' in T. D. Williams, (ed.), *Secret Societies in Ireland*, Dublin (1973), pp. 26-35; M. R. Beames, 'The Ribbon Societies: Lower-Class Nationalism in Pre-Famine Ireland', *Past & Present*, 97 (1982), pp. 128-43.
- 6 George Cornewall Lewis, *On local disturbances in Ireland, and on the Irish Church question*, London (1836), p. 99; Ruth Delany, *Ireland's Royal Canal*, Dublin (1992), pp. 80-85, 100; Colm Breathnach, 'Working Class Resistance in pre-Famine County Dublin: the Dalkey Quarry Strikes of the 1820s', *Saothar*, 30 (2005), pp. 9-19.
- 7 This interpretation closely follows the evaluation of the contemporary bishop of Meath, Thomas Nulty. A. C. Murray, 'Agrarian Violence and Nationalism in nineteenth-century Ireland: the Myth of Ribbonism', *Irish Economic and Social History*, 13 (1986), pp. 56-73, here 71-72.
- 8 W. E. Vaughan, *Landlords and Tenants*, Oxford (1994) 204, 217. David Fitzpatrick has also analysed the trade-union question in terms of family. David Fitzpatrick, 'Class, Family and Rural Unrest in nineteenth century Ireland', in P. J. Drudy, *Ireland: Land, Politics and People*, Cambridge (1982), pp. 37-75, here 64.
- 9 Fintan Lane, 'Rural labourers, social change and politics in late nineteenth-century Ireland', in Fintan Lane and Donal Ó Drisceoil, *Politics and the Irish Working Class, 1830-1945*, Basingstoke (2005), p. 115.
- 10 E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common*, Pontypool (1991), p. 478.
- 11 *Select Committee*, pp. 85, 156.
- 12 Reade's Notebook, 20 January 1865.
- 13 *Ibid*, 21 February 1865.
- 14 *Select Committee*, Appendix No. 6, 'County Inspector's Report laid before the Judge of Assize', pp.175-197. In 1869 the method of enumerating offences changed to record, for example, ten threatening notices, posted by the same perpetrators at the same time, as ten different crimes rather than one single crime. The constabulary returned to the old system in 1871.
- 15 *Select Committee*, pp. 181, 177, 213, 224; Reade's Notebook, 10 Aug 1869.
- 16 Reade's notebook, 23 August 1870.
- 17 *Select Committee*, Appendix No. 6, pp. 187, 193, 195; NAI, Chief Secretary's Office Registered Papers (CSORP from here on), 1870 4067.
- 18 *Select Committee*, Appendix No. 6, pp. 193, 189.
- 19 *Ibid*, p. 10, 102.
- 20 *Poor Inquiry, Ireland*, Appendix D. HC, 1836, vol. xxxii. Thanks to John Cunningham for directing me to this source.
- 21 Noel Wriothsley, 'Notes of a Short Tour Through the Midland Counties of Ireland in the Summer of 1836', in Jeremiah Sheehan (ed.), *Westmeath: as Others Saw it*, Moate (1982), p. 100.
- 22 John Cunningham, '"A Class Quite Distinct": the western herds and their defence of their working conditions', in Carla King and Conor McNamara (eds.), *The West of Ireland: New Perspectives on the Nineteenth Century*, Dublin (2011), pp. 137-60, here 138-144.
- 23 *Poor Inquiry, 1836*, p. 126.
- 24 *Ibid*, pp. 135-36.
- 25 *Returns of agricultural produce in Ireland in the year 1850*, HC, (1851) L; *Agricultural statistics, Ireland, 1880-1881*, HC (1881) XCIII.
- 26 Jeremiah Sheehan, *South Westmeath: Farm and Folk*, Dublin (1978), p. 191.
- 27 *The agricultural statistics of Ireland, for the year 1870*, HC (1872) LXIII; *Agricultural statistics, Ireland, 1880-1881*, HC (1881) XCIII.
- 28 HC Deb 27 February 1871, vol. 204, cc. 1013-14.
- 29 *Select Committee*, Appendix No. 6, pp. 181-82.
- 30 Reade's Notebook, 20 March 1869.
- 31 *Select Committee*, p. 173.
- 32 *Westmeath Guardian*, 24 March 1865; 20 Aug 1870.
- 33 *Ibid*, 24 September 1863.
- 34 *Freeman's Journal*, 30 April 1869; *Westmeath Guardian*, 29 March 1869.
- 35 Padraig G. Lane, 'Agricultural Labourers and Rural Violence, 1850-1914', *Studia Hibernica*, 27 (1993), pp. 77-87, here 84; see also David Seth Jones, *Graziers, Land Reform and Political Conflict in Ireland*, Washington, D.C. (1995).
- 36 *Westmeath Guardian*, 31 March 1864.
- 37 Fitzpatrick, 'Class, Family and Rural Unrest', p. 64.

- 38 *Select Committee*, pp. 34, 134.
- 39 Cunningham, "'A Class Quite Distinct'", p. 138.
- 40 *Select Committee*, p. 7.
- 41 *Ibid.*, pp. 74, 110.
- 42 NAI, CSORP, 1869/18692.
- 43 Reade's Notebook, 28 November 1869.
- 44 *Select Committee*, pp. 6, 53.
- 45 *Westmeath Guardian*, 13 May 1869.
- 46 *Ibid.*, 25 February 1858.
- 47 *Dublin Evening Mail*, 24 November 1858; *The Nation*, 27 November 1858. The *Mail* estimated the mob consisted of about 100 labourers, but *The Nation* gave the figure of 500.
- 48 *Select Committee*, 53. The chairman was also a magistrate in Dublin and Meath, and a Clerk to the Crown (for the issuing of writs to MPs). It was common in nineteenth century Ireland that prominent businessmen and landlords also held positions in the legal establishment. Cusack also personally knew Burke, the Under Secretary for Ireland.
- 49 *Select Committee*, p. 25.
- 50 Joseph J. Leckey, 'The Railway Servants Strike in Co. Cork, 1898', *Saothar*, 2 (1976), pp. 39-44, here 41.
- 51 *Ibid.*, p. 39.
- 52 *Select Committee*, pp. 54, 57.
- 53 *Ibid.*, pp. 50-4.
- 54 *Ibid.*, 52.
- 55 Delany, *Ireland's Royal Canal*, pp. 80-84.
- 56 Vaughan, *Landlords and Tenants*, p. 154.
- 57 NAI, Police and Crime Records, Threatening Letters, 104; NAI, CSORP, Return of Outrages, 1869/2273, 1870/4594.
- 58 *Westmeath Guardian*, 1 April 1858.
- 59 *Ibid.*, 2 June 1864.
- 60 *Ibid.*, 2, 16 June 1863.
- 61 *Select Committee*, pp. 9, 78, 144.
- 62 John O'Leary, *Fenians and Fenianism*, 2 Vols, London (1896), I, p. 111.
- 63 R.V. Comerford, *Fenians in Context: Irish Politics and Society 1848-1882*, Dublin (1985), p. 182; Vaughan, *Landlords and Tenants*, p. 206.
- 64 Lane, 'Rural Labourers', p. 115.
- 65 James S. Donnelly Jr, *Captain Rock: the Irish Agrarian Rebellion of 1821-1824*, Cork (2009), pp. 20-1, 174, 365; Beames, 'The Ribbon Societies'; Tom Garvin 'Defenders, Ribbonmen And Others: Underground Political Networks In Pre-Famine Ireland', *Past and Present*, 96, (1982), pp. 133-55.
- 66 Breandán Mac Giolla Choille, 'Fenians, Rice and Ribbonmen in County Monaghan, 1864-67', *Clogher Record*, 6 (1967), pp. 221-52.
- 67 *Proclamation of an Irish Republic, 1867*.
- 68 Marta Ramon, *A Provisional Dictator: James Stephens and the Fenian Movement*, Dublin (2007), p. 158.
- 69 NAI, Fenian Briefs, Carton 5, Envelope 18,
- 70 Comerford, *Fenians in Context*, p. 117.
- 71 The constabulary rarely bothered to make precise distinctions and one 'Description of Fenian Suspects 1866-1880', includes many Ribbonmen from Westmeath and Meath. NAI, Irish Crimes Records, 16/1-46.
- 72 *Select Committee*, pp. 111-12.
- 73 *Westmeath Guardian*, 24 December 1863.
- 74 Lane, 'Rural Labourers', pp. 122-23.
- 75 *Select Committee*, p. 6.
- 76 *Westmeath Guardian*, 12 May 1859.
- 77 *Select Committee*, pp. 10, 191, 196.
- 78 M. J. Kelly, 'The Irish people and the disciplining of dissent', in F. McGarry and J. McConnell (eds.), *The Black Hand of Irish Republicanism: Fenianism in Modern Ireland*, Dublin (2009), pp. 34-52, here 44; Eugenio Biagini, *British Democracy and Irish Nationalism*, Cambridge (2008), pp. 33-34.
- 79 Lee, 'The Ribbonmen', p. 32
- 80 *Select Committee*, pp. 19, 182.